

## Mercy and Compassion: A Call for Humane Diet

(a talk given by Bonnie Ambrosi at Temple Israel on 24 October 2014)

I am going to speak to you this evening about mercy.

Webster's dictionary defines mercy as compassion for one over whom you have power; or, the compassionate treatment of those in distress. Com-*passion* is, literally, suffering with another – hence, pity or sympathy for another.

Mercy and compassion are fundamental attributes of God. The scriptures are replete with references to God's mercy. Such beautiful verses as these from Psalm 103: "Adonai is merciful and gracious . . . As the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy." [103:8 and 103:11] Psalm 86:15 "But thou, Adonai, art a God full of compassion . . . and plenteous in mercy and truth." Psalm 111 describes God as "gracious and full of compassion," [111:4] and the very next Psalm describes a righteous man in the same words: gracious and full of compassion [112:4]. Inasmuch as we are made in the image of our Creator, we are called to be merciful and compassionate.

And what is the opposite of these qualities? Ruthless. Literally "without ruth." "Ruth" is a word that has completely dropped out of common use, but it's still in the dictionary. It means "compassion for the misery of another."

We each have the opportunity every day, several times a day, to practice mercy and compassion and ruth—when we choose what we will eat. This is one of the humblest, and at the same time most powerful and transformative ways in which we care for creation. I am not Jewish, but I see that Judaism is a deeply compassionate faith, and Jewish diet is above all a humane diet. The law of *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* forbids inflicting unnecessary pain on animals, and kosher law prescribes humane slaughter even, touchingly, to the extent of attempting to prevent the animal from realizing that it is about to be killed, so that it will not die in fear.

I will *not* read you a description of a standard American slaughterhouse, but suffice it to say that it is at the opposite end of the spectrum – a nightmare of torment, pain and terror.

Kosher slaughter alone, however, does not protect animals from suffering, because most kosher meat, eggs and dairy come from animals that were raised in factory farms. What do you know about factory farms? You may have a picture in your mind of what a farm is like: cows grazing in grassy meadows and chickens scratching happily in the yard. I grew up on a farm like that. It was true once, but, with rare exceptions, our food no longer comes from farms like this, and in fact relatively few such farms still exist in the US.

Since the 1960s, there has been a silent revolution in American animal agriculture. Virtually all the meat, eggs and dairy consumed in America today come from animals that were raised in CAFOs – concentrated animal feeding operations – where thousands or even tens of thousands of animals are packed together in enormous buildings. Everything about the process is carefully calculated to get the most production at the lowest cost. These are truly factory farms: highly-mechanized plants for turning out cheap protein. And the raw material for these factories is sentient beings. Look online at images of factory farms and you will understand immediately, and gut-wrenchingly, why this system totally violates Jewish law and every human instinct for mercy and kindness.

Here I would like to briefly address a common misconception about animal products. I have often heard people say that they are giving up red meat in order to have a more humane diet. Their intention is good, but they are misinformed. In fact, chickens and turkeys are the most abused animals on the planet. Most laying hens spend their entire lives crowded into tiny wire cages with several other hens, so cramped that they cannot spread their wings or turn around. Row upon row of these cages are stacked on top of each other and the excrement falls down onto the chickens below. Americans love breast meat, so turkeys and broiler chickens are bred to grow enormous breasts out of all proportion to the rest of their bodies or to the strength of their legs, which may break under the weight. Factory milk cows also suffer greatly. Growth hormones create gargantuan udders that the animals can hardly support so that they can give three to five times as much milk as a cow naturally would. Cows are homely creatures, but they are not brainless. They are very curious and very social. The natural lifespan of a cow is 40 years. Most factory farm cows live to the age of four.

Friends, where is mercy, where is kindness, where is compassion in this picture?

Let's look at a few passages in scripture that often come up in discussions of humane diet. The first is Genesis 1:26 in which God creates humans and gives them "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth." This verse is often cited as giving humans carte blanche to use other creatures for our own purposes, but this cannot be so in the continuous context of mercy and compassion that the Bible also teaches.

Dominion is about stewardship, not exploitation. And in fact, three verses later, in Genesis 1:29 we read: "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree in which is fruit . . .; to you it shall be for meat." So we see a plant-based diet in the peaceful, antediluvian world.

Now, move on to the story of Noah. After the flood, God tells Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be meat for you." [Genesis 9:3] But God also gives the first kosher law: man may not consume animal blood. And eating meat comes with this curse: "And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moves upon the earth." [Genesis 9:2] Some scholars see in this permission to eat meat a concession to man's fallen and exhausted state at this point in history.

But there are also indicators that we are to grow back into a more gentle existence. The prophet Micah refutes the use of animals as sacrifice: "With what shall I come before Adonai? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will Adonai be pleased with thousands of rams? He has showed you what is good; and what does Adonai require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" [Micah 6:6-8] Job 5:22-23 describes a future with the saving grace of the Creator: "Neither shall you be afraid of the beasts of the earth. For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you." And of course we have Isaiah's transcendent description of the Peaceable Kingdom, where all animals and humans dwell in harmony. [Isaiah 11:6-8]

So, what can we do? There is a growing movement in Judaism calling for humane diet as the natural expression of Jewish faith. The *simplest* way to have a humane diet *and* keep kosher is to stop eating animal products altogether. More people

go vegan every day, and mounting scientific evidence points to a plant-based diet as extremely healthful.

I know people who have given up animal products instantly after watching videos of factory farms. But if that is a bridge too far, the essential thing is to *find one step that you can take* in becoming more merciful. If you currently eat animal products at every meal, choose one meal each day for your compassion practice and make it plant-based only. Meditate on mercy, and gradually reduce the amount of animal foods you use overall. If you do eat cheese, eggs or meat, local is your very best choice, and it's available. The next best choice is organic.

But avoid all animal products that come from factories. When you eat them, you are eating misery. We are what we eat, literally, as we ingest stress hormones from these animals. How can we expect to be at peace if we eat fear? How can we quiet our minds if we eat agony? And how can we be merciful and still support this system of animal production?

This simple act of eating more mercifully every day is a humble but transformative practice that is accessible to anyone of any age, lifestyle or income bracket. There is a vital role for all people of faith today in bringing about a more humane food system, and Jewish communities can be leaders in this movement.

I invite you to pick up a brochure from the Jewish Vegetarians of North America or visit their website at [JewishVeg.com](http://JewishVeg.com) to find inspiration and practical resources for a merciful, plant-based diet. Changing our eating habits can be hard, but is that a bad thing? We don't grow spiritually by only doing what is easy. Embrace the challenge of it! Strengthen your resolve and soften your heart. Become ruthless – having compassion for the misery of others.

I'd like to close with this passage from Ecclesiastes [3:19-21] reminding us that animals are here *with* us, not for us: "For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beast; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?"